Emerging Vectors of Narratology: Toward Consolidation or Diversification? (A Response)

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Abstract

This is a response to the questions asked by Franco Passalacqua and Federico Pianzola as a follow-up of the 2013 ENN conference. The discussions that originated at the conference were rich and thought-provoking and so the editors of this special section of «Enthymema» decided to continue the dialogue about the state of the art and the future of narratology.

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1. Do you think that narratology has entered a phase of consolidation? If yes, what does this consolidation consist of? What do you consider to be the most important aspect to pursue with the aim of consolidation?

Yes, as research in narratology has expanded and diversified in transmedial and interdisciplinary fashion it has simultaneously sought to consolidate its disciplinary identity, in a professional as well as an intellectual sense. There has been a range of methodological innovations since the 1980s as we have moved 'towards' and sometimes past psychoanalytic (Peter Brooks, Ross Chambers), corporeal (Daniel Punday), postmodern (Mark Currie, Andrew Gibson), feminist (Susan Lanser, Robyn Warhol), natural (Monika Fludernik), rhetorical (James Phelan, Peter Rabinowitz), cognitive (Manfred Jahn, Alan Palmer, etc.), unnatural (Brian Richardson, Porter Abbot, etc.), mind-oriented (David Herman), cultural (Ansgar Nünning), postcolonial (Sue J. Kim, Marion Gymnich), digital (Ruth Page), and transmedial (Marie-Laure Ryan, Richard Walsh) narratologies.

As this has occurred, the original structuralist impulse to identify the formal features of any and all narratives has yielded to a broadly cognitive impulse to prove how any and all narratives are the product of our mental capacity for sense making. The most influential consolidating force has been the paradigm of the natural, with oral conversational storytelling figured as the prototype for all other narratives, and Theory of Mind as the evolutionary rationale. But even postmodernists and constructivists are wont to assert the basic human impulse for storytelling to justify the axiomatic importance of narrative.

This phase of consolidation has relied as much on a recurring insistence on the universality and ubiquity of narrative as it has on any genuine methodological cross pollination. Arguments that we are hard-wired for narrative, that storytelling is the chief means by which we make sense of experience (which go hand in hand with claims that literature makes us better people) constitute a forceful assertion of disciplinary identity

and underpin claims that narratology ought to be the theoretical ground in which the wider narrative turn across disciplines can be anchored. In turn, this rhetorical consolidation has facilitated institutional entrenchment.

The *International Society for the Study of Narrative* began in 1986 as the *Society for the Study of Narrative Literature*. The name change in 2008 acknowledged the expanded scope of narrative studies (although in practice the conference remains dominated by literature) and the desire to consolidate disciplinary identity around this expansion. This professional consolidation has gained pace since the turn of the millennium, with the emergence of research centres establishing a critical mass of institutionalized interdisciplinarity that wields considerable influence over publishing outlets such as journals and book series. The *Interdisciplinary Center for Narratology* was founded at Hamburg University in 2004; *Project Narrative* at the Ohio State University in 2006; the *Center for Narrative Research* at the University of Wuppertal in 2007; and the *Narrative Research Lab* at Aarhus University in 2007. In the Social Sciences, the *Centre for Narrative Research* was established at the University of East London in 2001, and the *Centre for Interdisciplinary Research on Narrative* at St Thomas University in 2003 (which organizes the *Narrative Matters* conference). The first *European Narratology Network* conference was held in 2009 and now they're holding conferences pondering how to consolidate narratological diversifications.

Interdisciplinarity is the imperative and the *raison d'être* of these institutions. In this way they embody not only an impulse in narrative studies, but the demands of the modern university and its competitive drive for research excellence. Research centres fulfill the function of what Bill Readings, in *The University in Ruins*, argued could be an antidote to the bureaucratic and institutional rigidity of traditional disciplines in the university: a site for the cluster of varying types of expertise around particular research problems which keeps the question of disciplinarity open as a permanent question. However, Readings also argued that disciplines should be dissolved in favour of «short-term collaborative projects of both teaching and research (to speak in familiar terms) which would be disbanded after a certain period, whatever their success» (176). The reason is that, despite their intellectual energy, «such collaborations have a certain half-life, after which they sink back into becoming quasi-departments with budgets to protect and little empires to build» (176). It seems unlikely any of the research centres will be voluntarily disbanded in the name of genuine interdisciplinarity.

The most important aspect in the pursuit of consolidation is to avoid homogenizing consensus, to attend to the specificities of individual disciplines and different objects of study, to recognize that 'narrative' itself is a contingent and changing construct of specific disciplinary methods. To clarify the distinctions and relations between narrative as mode of thought, a social practice and a cultural artefact, before asserting that there is a common ground between scholars across the disciplines, beyond the fact that they use the same 'keyword' in their abstracts for journal articles and research interests.

2. In your opinion, in what ways can narratology be said to diversify?

Narratology has obviously diversified its range of objects of study, from literature to film to comics to digital media, from material forms such as painting to ephemeral ones such as music and performance. This expansion has necessitated engaging with the diversity of methods from disciplines that study these objects and is accompanied by a tension between medium-specific and transmedial approaches, leaving open the question

of how to negotiate between investigations of a particular medium and contributions to the broader field of narrative theory. In line with the paradigm of the natural which establishes a continuum from conversational storytelling to works of narrative art, narratology has also sought methodological innovation by drawing upon speech act theory, socio-linguistics, discourse analysis, and cognitive science in particular. This very diversity has simultaneously generated the desire for consolidation, which is a familiar dynamic to all interdisciplinary enterprises.

2a. Does diversification imply more double entry narratologies (cognitive n., feminist n., unnatural n., etc.)? If yes, what is still missing for a more complete account of narrative phenomena?

We may be missing the point of diversification if we are seeking a «more complete account». Some of these double entry narratologies are in conflict with each other because they have different premises. Maintaining the tension between them seems far preferable to searching for common ground. The desire for a more complete account of narrative phenomena seems to imply that these phenomena are just out there waiting for scholars to pool their resources and finally work out how to explain narrative as a thing in itself.

According to Roger P. Mourad, in "At the Forefront: Postmodern Interdisicplinarity", modern interdisciplinarity attempts to unify all disciplines in order to repair the modern fragmentation of knowledge, to fill in the gaps between disciplines. «For these reasons», he argues, «modern interdisciplinarity is largely an uncritical extension of the disciplines rather than a critical alternative» (136). Whereas postmodern investigations would not proceed from pre-determined disciplinary methods or assumptions, instead emerging in the context of local enquiries. Clarifying the various distinctions between multi-, inter- and trans-disciplinarity and their institutional ramifications may help direct future enterprises.

2b. Or does diversification, perhaps simultaneously, involve a look at the various scientific cultures underlying research programs in narrative theory, past and present, but also non-Western? As theoreticians address issues of cognition and context in narrative, in what ways should the role of poetics and rhetoric in narratology be rethought?

Matti Hyvärinen has done much work already to examine the different research traditions and imperatives which have informed the heterogeneous micro-histories of the narrative turn, and it seems important to understand what specific problems various theories of narrative propose to solve: that is, what motivates the diversification and multiplication of theories across different disciplines? Innovations have not stemmed from a neutral desire to understand narrative phenomena. One of the most significant imperatives has come from Lyotard's critique of scientific knowledge, with his distinction between grand and *petit* narratives informing challenges to positivist methods and motivating politically engaged investigations of counter-narratives.

I understand poetics to be a theory of making, and rhetoric to be a study of the art of persuasion. For Genette, in *Narrative Discourse*, the paradox of poetics is that «there are no objects except particular ones, and no science except of the general» (23) and thus he proposes a method of analysis which puts theory at the service of criticism and criticism at the service of theory. Cognitive approaches have reformulated the

'hypostasized' categories of structuralist narratology as interpretive strategies, as scripts and schemata we bring to a work and thus, for me, shifted the emphasis of poetics onto reception.

Contextual approaches have demonstrated that formalist analysis cannot operate in a vacuum, and lent weight to the study of the rhetorical purposes and effects of narrative. The most important way to rethink both poetics and rhetoric in this regard is to think less about how the 'toolkit' of narratology can be put to use in the service of political and ethical criticism, than about how the toolkit itself is a product of the research questions we pose, and thus how narratological categories can be reconsidered as a result.

In this light we certainly need to pay more attention to the historical development of narrative forms and thus to the contingency of narratological categories themselves. This attention will be facilitated by the further development of another double entry approach: diachronic narratology. Furthermore, the paratext, I think, will gain increasing significance because it allows scholars to negotiate ostensible binaries between the formalist and the contextualist, essentialist and pragmatic, intentionalist and non-intentionalist.

3a. With respect to question 2, what contributions can each narratology or narrative theory bring to the others? To what extent can concepts and methods travel and be shared among different theories? And between narratology and other disciplines?

I don't think that each version of 'narratology' should feel compelled to contribute to the other. One version may be refined in response to the other, for instance, rhetorical narratology may want to consider the role of gender in its theory of communication, and it may need to address criticisms about narrative voice as a linguistic illusion, but I don't think proponents of a particular theory need to work together to solve each other's problems. I would rather see each 'narratology' strengthen and defend its own position in response to criticism. The recent book *Narrative Theory: Core Concepts and Critical Debates* (Herman et. al) is a good model here, in which representatives of different movements (rhetorical, feminist, mind-oriented, unnatural) outline their approach and then respond to the others.

This sort of debate strikes me as more productive than trying to bring competing theories together for a 'fuller' or 'more complete' model. Synthesizing rhetorical and cognitive approaches (which is really an attempt to reconcile intentionalist criticism with reader response theory) appears to be the most common attempt at communal scholarship. Another is the attempt to bring formalist and contextualist approaches together, although sometimes this strikes me as a false dichotomy since contextualist approaches have never eschewed the study of form. My feeling is that we ought to be remaking narrative theory anew each time we approach a particular research problem by deciding what is the best method required to address this problem.

Concepts travel fairly easily, such as the idea of a narrator travelling from literature to film and painting. Methods are a lot harder to share, though, because methods tend to be developed in response to discipline specific problems. Sharing methods between the study of narrative artforms and the study of 'natural' phenomena such as sociolinguistic small stories research, or the study of political speeches and policy making, etc is even more fraught, and I think has a law of diminishing returns. What it brings up most acutely is the question of disciplinarity. Can narratology really call itself a discipline? It

seems very rare for someone to study narrative from outside an existing discipline, such as literary studies, or psychology. And once we have a field of study as broadly defined as 'narrative', are scholars in the field obliged to be familiar with all narratives and all methods in order to contribute to that field? Are discipline specific investigations of narrative invalidated as contributions to the master discipline of narratology if their findings are not applicable across the disciplines?

3b. Do you think that narratology as a consolidating discipline should be concerned by issues of incommensurability due to the different ontologies and epistemologies underlying each theory or research program?

Yes, of course narratology should be concerned with potentially incommensurable differences. Not in the sense that we should seek to overcome conceptual and methodological divides between theories, but in the sense that we should wonder whether the term *narrative* is so protean and diffuse that it cannot adequately serve some ideal attempt to bring the disciplines together. The real divide here is between the humanities and social sciences. This involves an incommensurabilty between methods of textual analysis and methods of empirical research. Another problem is the question of referentiality, which can be bracketed off in studies of fiction, but not in studies of history, law, sociology, etc. The non-referentiality of fiction is supplemented by the inversion of the story/discourse division, but in the social sciences what Martin Kreiswirth calls the bivalency of narrative has a different referential relationship to the actual world, and a desire to make truth claims which rely upon this relationship.

In turn, we need to take seriously the critiques of narrative and narrative analysis from within disciplines: not everyone in narrative medicine or international relations, for instance, thinks the narrative turn is a positive thing. If narrative is a mode of knowing («storied knowledge» as Kreiswirth defines it), we should consider the extent to which it is incommensurable with other modes of knowing, and thus whether we are privileging narrative for the sake of disciplinary expansion. The recent emergence of studies of fictionality as a rhetorical resource employed across different modes of communication, rather than a constitutive generic feature of the novel, has the potential to contribute productively to these debates. This is because anti-positivistic critiques of history and the social sciences wish to point out the constructed nature of knowledge in these disciplines, and counter-critiques of the narrative turn conflate narrative with relativism and fictionalization.

But incommensurability is not only an issue in theoretical terms. Different research programs can be incommensurate for reasons of interest or practicality. How many film studies scholars know or care about narrative theory? Do those who study lyric poetry really need to know about narratology? When I attend a conference or a seminar or workshop and sit in a room with people from music, psychology, sociology, design, advertising, etc., I may have fascinating conversations about how we each understand narrative, but I don't go away thinking I could borrow their methods, or that I want to collaborate with them. My expertise and research interest is in narrative fiction, not in fiction as an example of narrative. Hence my ambitions do not lie in developing methods which will apply across media or disciplines. There are some scholars, such as David Herman, who straddle in spectacular fashion a range of disciplines in the service of a transdisciplinary narratology, but this requires the continued existence of disciplinary boundaries for its dynamism.

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